DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 042 EA 014 315

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TITLE State Perceptions on State-Wide Evaluation in California.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration (35th, Seattle, WA, August 16-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; Credibility; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Needs; Expectation; *Information Utilization; *Legislators; *Program Evaluation; State Departments of Education; State Officials; State Programs
IDENTIFIERS *California

ABSTRACT

California state officials vary in their perceptions of the functions and uses of state Department of Education evaluations, according to state legislators, legislative staff members, department administrators, and outside evaluators whose opinions were gathered through interviews and at a 1981 symposium. Highlighted here are the legislators' expectations of and interest in these evaluations as well as their perceptions of the evaluations' credibility and utilization. There is special emphasis on whether state-level evaluations of educational programs are used to legitimize existing programs or to provide informative input for judging new or ongoing programs. The findings indicate that legislators expect evaluations to provide useful input but that this seldom happens; that interest in evaluations varies from legislator to legislator; that the credibility of evaluations is low among legislators; and that legislators use (and publicize) evaluation results selectively or not at all. These findings imply that evaluation is a political process and a means of legitimizing preconceived policies. Further research should examine the politics of finance-related evaluations, such as those involving controversial issues or federal block grants. (Author/RW)

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STATE PERCEPTIONS ON STATE-WIDE EVALUATION IN CALIFORNIA*

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EA 014 315

*A revised draft of an address delivered at the 37th annual conference of the National Association of Professors of Educational Administration, August 1981, Seattle, Washington

STATE PERCEPTIONS ON STATE-WIDE EVALUATION IN CALIFORNIA

The Question

This paper reports on recent state level perceptions of state level evaluation in education in California. The central question which guided the search for these perceptions was the extent to which the function of evaluation is perceived more as a legitimation of social policies already made by the state legislature than as a fundamental set of inputs to the legislature in its formulation of new policies.

The question is not new. Scholars have not only asked the question, but also believe that most evaluations at the state level serve to legitimate social policies already made. State (and federal) evaluation administrators have also asked the question. They become increasingly frustrated when their large-scale evaluation reports are not utilized as significant inputs in the formulation of new policies. If they force themselves to continue to engage in what they believe are fruitless evaluations, they cannot avoid being engaged also in the self evaluation of the organization in which they work. At stake for them is the power and influence which their organization possesses and the perceived threat to their organization's survival (Wildawsky 1972).

The data for this paper derive from two sources. One is a series of personal interviews conducted with California state officials during 1980 and 1981. The other is a symposium held in April of 1981 in Los Angeles on this topic.

Parameters

The central agency in California which is formally charged with responsibilities for state-level evaluation is the State Department of Education. Within the Department, the Evaluation Unit plays a key role. Other units in the Department also conduct evaluations (e.g., vocational education) as do other state agencies (e.g., State Department of Budget). Independent evaluation contractors are also involved. Much of what the State Department of Education does in the area of evaluation is mandated by the State Legislature. Some of what it does is also initiated in the Department itself. While all evaluations at the state level may be important, the focus here is only on evaluations mandated by the legislature and conducted by the Department.

If the accumulation of evaluation information is perceived to serve primarily as enabling legislation, it could be assumed by default that evaluation's function is not primarily to legitimate social policies already made. If, on the other hand, evaluation is not found to function primarily as enabling legislation, the probability is high that it may serve to legitimate social policies already made. There are simply few, if any, other possible purposes of mandated evaluation at the state level.

Five criteria are selected here to facilitate a preliminary examination of perceptions about the function of evaluation. These are as follows:

(1) the expectations which the legislature itself has of evaluation;

(2) the interest which the legislature has in evaluation;

(3) the credibility which the legislature attributes to evaluation;

(4) the utilization of evaluation by the legislature; and

(5) the publicity which the legislature gives to its utilization of evaluation.

Based on these criteria, five corresponding hypotheses may be generated as follows. Evaluation may serve primarily to legitimate social policies already made if,

(1) the legislature's expectation of evaluation is not primarily to serve as input to enabling legislation;

(2) the legislature's interest in evaluation is not primarily to serve as input to enabling legislation;

(3) the credibility, which the legislature attributes to evaluation as input to enabling legislation, is low;

(4) the legislature does not utilize evaluation as input to enabling legislation; and

(5) the legislature does not publicize its utilization of evaluation as input to enabling legislation.

Findings

The following are preliminary findings pertinent to the above five hypotheses. With regard to expectations, several legislators report that high expectations exist in the legislature that evaluation should serve as input to enabling legislations. Some legislators believe that it would, primarily because they are so led to believe by independent evaluation contractors. None of the legislators report that it actually does. With regard to expectations, then, there is reason to believe that

evaluation does not serve as input to enabling legislation and, therefore, if used, may serve instead to legitimate social policies already made.

More in-depth data were collected with regard to legislative interest in evaluation. Several State Department of Education officials believe that legislative interest fluctuates primarily as a function of individual legislators and specific programs. Individual legislators change. Programs are of interest to some legislators but not to others. Legislators who develop the strongest interest in evaluation are authors of proposed bills. It takes at least a year before such an interest develops. The interest grows primarily out of the need to defend a proposed bill. Those legislators who develop an interest in evaluation seem to acquire appreciation not only of summative, but also of formative evaluation. The interest seldom develops in the whole legislative committee, however. Other than the interest developed by authors of potential bills, skepticism rather than interest exists among legislators with regard to evaluation. Most of them are willing to allocate less funds for evaluation activities, especially if the evaluation is done outside of the State Department of Education. They believe that outsiders raise expectations which cannot be met. In contrast, officials in the Department's Evaluation Unit believe that the source of legislative skepticism is often associated with in-house evaluations. These officials believe that legislators see the in-house staff as having too much interest vested in showing programs' success.

Whoever is right about the reasons for the skepticism, the latter does exist. Data about legislative interest serve, then, as a strong indication that, if used, evaluation serves to legitimate policies already made rather than as inputs to the formulation of new policies.

As to the criterion of credibility, officials in the Evaluation Unit believe that the Department's credibility is low in the eyes of the legislature. They, themselves, admit to having practiced manipulation of information in the past. They report that such practice stopped in 1977, but that the Unit's image in the eyes of the legislature has not changed. Such findings are insufficient so as to indicate the exact function of evaluation.

The question of legislative utilization is central to the purpose of this paper. Legislators claim that most evaluation information turns out to be not useful for new decisions or policies. Legislative staffs report that authors of potential bills do not always even share with others all the purposes of the enabling legislation and, thus, the relation of evaluation to such legislation is vague at best. Staffs also report that when the legislature considers already existing programs, it seldom looks at evaluations of these programs. It seldom uses evaluation reports to defend program continuation. It seldom eliminates programs altogether. The legislature is not even involved in the shared work of the Management and Evaluation Commission and the State Board of Education which are attempting to clarify the uses of evaluation.

An interesting utilization-related question is what happens on those occasions when evaluation is used and when its findings do not meet needs of legislators. Officials in the State Department of Education report that in such cases, although both in-house and outside evaluations exist, the legislature uses only the external ones. Some external evaluators report that one or more of the following may occur when their evaluation does not meet legislative needs: evaluation may be attacked; there may

be pressures for rewrites; evaluation may be coopted; and selective quotes from the evaluation report may be made. The reason for such phenomena may be related to the fact that these evaluations center on what is being done and that the legislature's interest is in what should be done. An evaluation of what is done does not meet the expectations which interested legislators have. An evaluation of what should be done is not provided to them. Findings on utilization strongly suggest that evaluation serves to legitimate policies already made.

The last indicator is publicity. Legislative staffs elaborate on the selective-quote phenomenon in relation to the publicity which legislators give to evaluation. The selective use of evaluation, according to them, receives over publicity. Evaluation which centers on monitoring program implementation receives under publicity. Both of the above may be due to the fact that legislators' interest in the form of evaluation is far greater than in its substance, and that their interest in specific programs is far greater than in issues whose resolution is assumed to be brought about by these programs. From the publicity perspective, then, it seems that evaluation serves as a legitimizing tool.

Implications for Future Research

To suggest that state-level mandated evaluation serves to legitimate social policies already made is to characterize it as political in nature. In fact, the politics of evaluation can be viewed as the process whereby evaluation legitimizes preconceived policies. Such a view certainly departs from others which have been suggested including a very broad one (Patton 1978, pp. 46-50); an audience satisfier (House 1980, ch. 4); a program regulator (Shapiro 1980); a value issues-resolving instrument

(Glasman 1979, p. 40); an evaluation criteria-defending instrument (Iannaccone in Kirst 1972); and an instrument for establishing professional standards for evaluators (Stufflebeam in Berk 1981). The added view of the politics of evaluation establishes new domains of inquiry associated with evaluation in relationship to control.

Finance-related evaluation is a promising focus not only because the state's role in school finance has substantially increased, but also because funding is at the heart of provisions of educational services. A recent study in California (Johnson 1980) is a useful beginning. Johnson studied 52 fiscally-related legislative mandates covering the 1975-1979 period. He found statistically significant correlations between funding and evaluation characteristics of these mandates. A central implication of his study is that state rule making and control may, in fact, be operationalized via the inclusion of evaluation components in funding legislation and that the scope and intensity of these components are indicative of the state's authority in education (Glasman and Johnson, in press).

It may be true that legislative control of state funds for education is exercised to an extent also through annual accounting procedures. But it is also true that funding mandates include evaluation components, even if such inclusion is designed primarily to establish some credibility for the legislature itself. The inclusion of evaluation components has significant implications for the political nature of evaluation. Especially in finance legislation, legislators initiate the inclusion of evaluation components with the help of their staffs. Their interest in building evaluation into finance legislation is usually a function of a controversy

which surrounds the potential bill. Their interest in evaluation decreases markedly once the bill is enacted. Thus, legislative authorities vis-a-vis the public at large as well as vis-a-vis the public school system itself can be effectively examined with the aid of evaluation components of funding legislation.

The possibility has recently increased that federal block grants will be provided to the states. Opinions vary as to what effects these grants might have on the politics of evaluation at the state level. Several officials in the State Department of Education and most officials in its Evaluation Unit believe that block grants are a non-issue for the politics of evaluation at the state level. They foresee pertinent changes in deliberations of local governmental units rather than in those of state agencies. Some legislators feel differently about the block grants. They think that such a federal move would lead to less categorical funding and, thus, also to a different politics of evaluation at the state level. Their prediction is that <u>fewer</u> compromises would be needed to satisfy authors of potential legislations which are associated with specific education programs, and that <u>more</u> compromises would be needed to satisfy authors of general aid legislations. Legislators also believe that evaluation strings associated with finance legislation would be loosened. Some legislative staffs disagree. They think that evaluation would take other forms, but not disappear.

While opinions vary, some principles are suggestive. The future politics of educational evaluation at the state level will have to be a function, at least in part, of the federal message. If the message is

efficiency, then probably more evaluation will be required, but certainly not less. The complex political nature of evaluation will probably continue. If the message is decentralization of financial decision making, then relaxation of required evaluation information may follow along with a simplification of the political nature of evaluation. In such an event, there is still no guarantee that evaluation for decision making will mushroom, especially for decisions which involve budgetary cuts.

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